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ABSTRACT

This policy brief draws together research, ideas, and initiatives on improving teaching quality, especially materials from states in the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory's region. It is intended to help policymakers think about which policies might foster improved teacher quality and how to combine policies into an integrated strategy for giving all students access to effective teachers. It is organized around three broad strategies aimed at: improving the teacher talent pool, fostering and supporting quality teaching, and countering threats to teacher quality. Improving the teacher talent pool involves raising the bar on teacher preparation, requiring assessments for new teachers, and rethinking teacher licensing. Fostering and supporting quality teaching involves creating programs to mentor new teachers, creating focused professional development, and creating better ways to evaluate teachers. Countering threats to teacher quality involves removing ineffective teachers, eliminating out-of-field teaching, and providing incentives to keep good teachers. Overall, policies are required at various levels and at various stages during teachers' careers. (Contains 28 references.) (SM)

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Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory
Policy Brief, June 1999

Bryan Goodwin

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MID-CONTINENT REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY

Policy Brief

McREL June 1999

Improving Teaching Quality: Issues & Policies

by Bryan Goodwin

"If we know anything from research over a 30-year period about what affects student achievement, it's teacher quality," said Susan Fuhrman, dean of the University of Pennsylvania's graduate school of education (Bradley, 1999). The results of two recent studies illustrate her point.

A Texas study found that teacher qualifications (as indicated by scores on licensing exams, possession or lack of master's degrees, and years of experience) accounted for approximately 40 percent of measured variance in students' reading and math scores on standardized tests. According to that study, the impact of teacher qualifications was greater than any other single factor, including class size, parent education, income, and language background (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF], 1997).

Similarly, Tennessee students with three consecutive years of instruction by ineffective teachers scored as much as 50 percentile points lower on statewide assessments than students with a string of effective teachers. Also, students of effective teachers showed impressive gains, regardless of prior achievement. Meanwhile, students of ineffective teachers, including students with high previous levels of achievement, failed to show appropriate academic growth (Sanders, 1998).

While few may dispute that students learn more from effective teachers, there is less agreement about what contributes to effective teaching. Some say it's deep subject matter knowledge. Others say it's the ability to employ research-based instructional techniques. Still others say it's both. Proposed solutions based on these disparate beliefs represent a wide array of sometimes conflicting strategies for improving teacher quality.

This policy brief draws together research, ideas, and initiatives — especially those from states in McREL's region (Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming). The intent is to assist policymakers in thinking about not only which policies might foster improved teacher quality, but also how to combine policies into an integrated strategy for giving all students access to effective teachers. The discussion is organized around three broad strategies aimed at 1) improving the teacher talent pool, 2) fostering and supporting quality teaching, and 3) countering threats to teacher quality.

POLICY ISSUES AND OBJECTIVES

Improving the teacher talent pool:
- Raise the bar on teacher preparation
- Require assessments for new teachers
- Rethink teacher licensing

Foster and support quality teaching:
- Create programs to mentor new teachers
- Create focused professional development
- Create better ways to evaluate teachers

Counter threats to teacher quality:
- Remove ineffective teachers
- Eliminate out-of-field teaching
- Provide incentives to keep good teachers

Improving the teacher talent pool

As a first step, policy strategies should ensure that only capable, well-prepared individuals become teachers. As Arthur E. Wise, president of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), put it, "A very effective strategy is to get it right the first time, to properly prepare teachers the first time around. In the past, we have not necessarily done that" (Bradley, 1999).

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Raise the bar on teacher preparation

It is often too easy to get into teaching colleges, wrote Albert Shanker (1996), former president of the American Federation of Teachers. The most common entry test, the Praxis I, is little more than a tenth-grade literacy and numeracy test. Such low standards, Shanker said, "are apt to discourage many intellectually serious and well-prepared students from entering teacher education programs." One way to raise the bar is for states to create their own entry tests, like Missouri's College Basic Academic Subjects Examination, which tests college students on core subject knowledge and cross-disciplinary skills prior to their entry into teacher preparation programs (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 1999).

Linda Darling-Hammond, executive director of The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, said states also should set higher standards for what students learn once they get into teaching colleges (NCTAF, 1996). She recommended that states insist all teaching colleges attain NCATE accreditation, which requires them to provide students with full liberal arts foundations, effective teaching strategies, and instruction on teaching standards to diverse students.

But some question whether NCATE accreditation is really the best way to raise the bar on teacher preparation. Ballou and Podgursky (1997a) found no evidence showing NCATE-trained teachers to be of superior quality. On the contrary, they noted that many highly regarded programs, including Columbia Teachers College and Harvard, are not NCATE-accredited.

Thus, a different strategy for improving teacher preparation might be for states to set their own standards for what prospective teachers learn. For example, Colorado lawmakers recently passed a bill requiring prospective teachers to have 800 hours of hands-on, field-based experience in the classroom before receiving a teaching certificate (Sanko, 1999).

Require assessments for new teachers

Another way to ensure quality teacher preparation is to test prospective teachers upon graduation. Missouri, for example, requires teaching college graduates to take exit tests. In New York and Florida, teaching colleges risk losing their state funding unless they demonstrate that 80 percent or more of their graduates pass exit tests (Bradley, 1999).

"States have not yet developed good assessments of teachers' knowledge and skills and are still relying on tests that may have little relationship to classroom practice."

However, Fuhrman noted, "States have not yet developed good assessments of teachers' knowledge and skills and are still relying on tests that may have little relationship to classroom practice" (Bradley, 1999). Thus, NCTAF recommended that states adopt the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium's (INTASC) assessments for new teachers. INTASC comprises 30 states, including Kansas, Missouri, and South Dakota. The test, based upon standards for professional growth, is currently being pilot-tested by the developer, the Educational Testing Service.

There is some debate, however, as to whether teacher tests truly identify ineffective teachers. A recent study of Colorado's subject matter and pedagogy tests for would-be teachers concluded that the exams — and the millions of dollars and thousands of hours spent on them — have more to do with "the love affair and comfort the public seems to have with licensing tests," than screening out ineffective teachers (Cobb, Shaw, Millard, & Bomotti, 1999).

Rethink teacher licensing

In light of the uneven quality of teacher preparation programs, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (1999) has recommended that states

scrap teacher certification requirements to give principals a wider field of applicants from which to choose. The plan, which is supported by the governors of Michigan and Pennsylvania, as well as chief state school officers in Arizona, Colorado, Florida, and Pennsylvania, also calls on states to "focus relentlessly on results" by relying on quantitative evaluations of teachers. In particular, the plan cited the evaluation system created in Tennessee (described later in this brief).

The Fordham Foundation plan draws upon the work of Ballou and Podgursky (1997a), who argued that strict licensure policies may actually reduce teacher quality by deterring those "who place the greatest value on their time," such as people making mid-career changes who could bring practical experience and maturity to the job. Tougher licensing standards (and by extension, more course requirements) discourage those who have "attractive options [outside the classroom] and leaves teaching to those who won't or can't do anything else that pays as well."

Already, 12 states offer "alternative" licenses with the intent of moving individuals into the classroom who have degrees in fields other than teacher education. Under Colorado's program, college graduates who demonstrate requisite subject matter knowledge earn initial licensure while teaching and undergoing a year of training and supervision. Kansas and Wyoming have their own variations of alternative licensure programs (Feistritzer & Chester, 1999).

Another reason given for offering non-traditional licenses is teacher shortages, such as in Nebraska, where there may be 1,600 unfilled positions in the next four years (O'Connor, 1999). Darling-Hammond (1998), however, noted that nationwide, teaching colleges graduate nearly twice as many teachers as are hired. Thus, the problem is not a lack of licensed teachers, but rather a lack of reciprocity in licensing among states. States might alleviate the problem by using common standards and tests (e.g., INTASC) and licensing out-of-state teachers who meet the standards and pass the tests.

Many districts create their own shortages by starting all incoming teachers at the bottom of the pay scale, regardless of their years of experience.

Darling-Hammond also pointed out that many districts create their own shortages by starting all incoming teachers at the bottom of the pay scale, regardless of their years of experience. She said districts could attract better teachers by compensating them for years of experience gained in other districts.

Another way to help alleviate teacher shortages, according to Darling-Hammond, is to grant automatic certification to all teachers with National Board Certification, a mark of distinction granted to accomplished teachers who pass rigorous assessments. So far, 20 states have enacted such policies. Colorado is one of them; a similar policy has been proposed in Missouri.

Foster and support quality teaching

Teaching, especially teaching well, is no small challenge. As a result, even capable, well-prepared novice teachers need help in learning the ropes. Likewise, seasoned teachers need to be able to adapt to new challenges of the job. This second set of policies offers ways to ensure, maintain, and gauge the ongoing quality of both novice and seasoned teachers.

Create programs to mentor new teachers

Sink or swim — that is often the nature of new teachers' induction to the profession. It also may be the reason why 30 percent of new teachers leave within the first five years of teaching (U.S. Department of Education, 1997b). But when new teachers are mentored or given lengthy induction programs, they are less likely to leave the profession and more likely to become effective instructors, according to NCTAF (1996). NCTAF (1997) also suggested states

may need to take the lead in requiring mentoring programs since in states where mentoring is left up to local initiatives, less than 15 percent of new teachers report being mentored. In states where induction is required, 75 percent of new teachers say they were mentored.

In the McREL region, Missouri and Colorado both require multiyear induction or mentoring programs (Consortium for Policy Research in Education [CPRE], 1998), and Nebraska offers incentives for districts to create mentoring programs (Hain, 1998). Montview Elementary School in Aurora, CO, a National Awards Program for Model Professional Development winner, has "teacher-leaders" who coach both novice and seasoned teachers. School officials estimate the program costs $50,000 per year, but credit it for big gains in student scores on district assessments and for nearly eliminating achievement gaps between white and non-white students.

Create focused professional development

While the vast majority of teachers are adequately prepared for their jobs, the demands of the job change. For example, in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota, ethnic diversity among students increased by more than 20 percent from 1986 to 1995 (U.S. Department of Education, 1997b). At the same time, teachers across the region are being asked to teach new content standards.

To meet these changing conditions, teachers need professional development to expand their knowledge and learn new teaching strategies. While a sizable chunk of local budgets already goes toward staff development — by one estimate up to 5.7 percent (Corcoran, 1995) — these funds tend to pay for one-shot training programs, exactly what the research deems ineffective. Moreover, salary increases and reimbursements for continuing education often pay for teachers to gain qualifications that will eventually remove them from the classroom (Corcoran, 1995). States may inadvertently add to the problem by simply requiring hours of training without guiding quality or content (Hirsch, Koppich, & Knapp, 1998).

In response to such concerns, Missouri has created standards for effective professional development (CPRE, 1998). Nebraska provides incentives for districts to adopt voluntary standards (Hain, 1998) and North Dakota's voluntary standards are expected to become part of the North Central Accreditation process (CPRE, 1998).

These standards typically recommend that staff development be both data-driven and aimed at improving student achievement. Woodrow Wilson Elementary School in Manhattan, KS, another national Model Professional Development Award winner, illustrates this point. In response to state requirements to show how staff development impacts classroom instruction, the school focused staff development on increasing student achievement in math — a topic teachers identified through a schoolwide action research project. As a result, the school posted large gains in statewide math assessments. It now plans to use the same focused effort to raise student scores in reading and social studies (U.S. Department of Education, 1997a).

A key component of professional development is knowing which teachers need what kind of help.

Create better ways to evaluate teachers

A key component of professional development is knowing which teachers need what kind of help. As a result, many states and districts are trying to devise better ways to evaluate teachers. California, for example, recently became the first state to adopt a statewide peer review program granting teachers the power to remove colleagues.

Proponents say peer reviews provide more depth than the typical principal review, which is often based upon simply observing a class or two. Also, the reviews are tougher. As one supporter put it, "Teachers don't want to teach with bad

colleagues." Critics, however, say few teachers are fired under peer review programs. (Only 2 percent of teachers in Columbus, OH, were assigned to intervention over an 8-year period.) In addition, "peer review is a very difficult policy to implement from the state down," noted Gerry Hayward, co-director of Policy Analysis for California Education. "It takes a long time and a high level of trust between a district and its teachers" (DeFao, 1999).

Other states, like Tennessee, are developing more quantitative means to evaluate teachers. Principals in that state look at student scores on statewide tests to gauge the performance of teachers. For example, if math scores for an entire class of fourth graders dip compared to their scores the year before, a principal may decide to examine curriculum or instruction in that class. The key pieces of the system are that 1) tests are tied to curricular standards; 2) equivalent, yet nonredundant tests are given each year to avoid teaching to them; and 3) principals are assisted in interpreting data for individual teachers, which remain confidential and used only for diagnostic, not punitive purposes (Sanders, 1998).

In this region, a 1998 Colorado law requires one of the standards for measuring teacher performance to be related to classroom instruction and to include multiple measures of student performance (Education Commission of the States [ECS], 1998a).

Counter threats to teacher quality

Even the best teacher preparation, induction, and staff development programs may be undermined if ineffective teachers cannot be removed, if teachers are teaching subjects they were not trained to teach, or if salary structures fail to attract or reward good teachers. This final set of policies addresses these threats to teacher quality.

Remove ineffective teachers

"You hear it over and over again," said Amy Wilkins, an analyst with the Education Trust. "It's very difficult to get the worst teachers fired. They end up getting shuffled rather than fired" (Fox, 1999). As a result, despite arguments that tenure protects teachers from politics and nepotism, many states are considering ways to expedite the removal of ineffective teachers, including scrapping tenure. In 1998, Colorado streamlined dismissal timelines and added "unsatisfactory performance" to a list of reasons for termination. Similarly, South Dakota granted school boards the authority to discontinue, without further process or reason, contracts for teachers employed for less than four consecutive terms of employment (ECS, 1998b).

However, teachers at Model Professional Development Award-winning sites offered a different view on getting rid of ineffective teachers. They said if teachers are working together to improve student achievement, unmotivated or under-qualified teachers cannot hide. As a result, those who do not share their colleagues' zeal for boosting student achievement tend to seek new places to work where less may be asked of them.

Eliminate out-of-field teaching

All the best policies to improve teacher quality may do little good "if large numbers of teachers continue to be assigned to teach subjects other than those for which they were educated or certified," warned University of Georgia's Richard Ingersoll (1998). Nationwide, an estimated 55 percent of high school physics teachers, 52 percent of history teachers, and 28 percent of math teachers do not have even a college minor in those fields (NCTAF, 1996). Results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that students suffer when teachers lack subject knowledge. Most notably, eighth-grade math students whose teachers were math majors scored much higher than students whose teachers were not (Education Trust, 1998).

Both state- and district-level policies can address the problem. States can require high school teachers to have college majors in subjects they teach in order to be licensed. As of 1996, only 22 states, including Colorado, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming, had such

policies in place (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). Another state policy in Georgia created a "truth in advertising policy" requiring districts to publicize the academic majors and minors of teachers (Bradley, 1999). At the local level, districts can change hiring practices to insist on hiring only educators with majors in the subjects they will teach — something which only two-thirds of the nation's districts were doing as of 1997 (NCTAF, 1997).

"The way to make sure that there are qualified teachers in every classroom is to upgrade the job of teaching."

Nonetheless, such measures may fail to get at the heart of the problem, according to Ingersoll (1998). High turnover rates force school officials to make hurried hiring decisions or to simply pull teachers in from other areas to fill vacated classes. "The implications for reform are clear," Ingersoll wrote. "The way to make sure that there are qualified teachers in every classroom is to upgrade the job of teaching. Well-paid, well-respected occupations that offer good working conditions rarely have difficulty with recruitment or retention."

Provide incentives to keep good teachers

Even after taking into account vacation time and summer income, teachers still earn 10 to 15 percent less than similarly educated counterparts in other occupations (NCTAF, 1997). But simply raising salaries may not improve teacher quality, wrote Ballou and Podgursky (1997b). They found that a 20 percent increase in teacher salaries in the 1980s failed to raise teacher quality (as gauged by new teachers' undergraduate grade point averages and selectivity of colleges attended). At fault, they wrote, are district salary schedules that give raises to all teachers, regardless of performance.

Recently, some districts have begun overhauling salary schedules in order to link teacher pay more closely to performance. Douglas County, CO, for example, limits rewards for years of experience to only those years in which principals judge a teacher's performance to be "proficient" based on established criteria. The district also awards $1,000 bonuses to teachers selected by their principals as outstanding, based on teaching portfolios and specific criteria (Kelley & Odden, 1995).

Conclusion

There is no quick fix or simple way to improve teacher quality. As this brief suggests, policies are required at various levels (from legislatures to district offices to school buildings), as well as at various stages during teachers' careers (from preparation to induction to staff development). Hirsch, Koppich, and Knapp (1998) noted that in practice, such policies are seldom integrated. That is, states have policies in place but have not coordinated them into comprehensive, systemic policy strategies. As a result, "state policies in the area of improving teaching often have an idiosyncratic and disjointed feel." Thus, the challenge for policymakers is to determine not only which policy levers to pull, but also which ones will work together to create a long-term strategy for improving teacher quality.

"State policies in the area of improving teaching often have an idiosyncratic and disjointed feel."

Hirsch, Koppich, and Knapp contend that whether states have devised a "package" of cohesive policies, as opposed to an amalgam of separately conceived laws and programs, may determine their success at improving teacher quality. Policymakers should thus examine how well existing policies address the many facets of this complex policy issue. Collectively, the policies described in this brief are intended to form the basis of an overall strategy to ensure all students have access to quality teaching.

Bryan Goodwin is program coordinator at McREL.

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